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John Wesley's Theology of Salvation

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One of the main questions that every Christian tradition seeks to answer is: how can humanity be saved? There are many answers to that question. The Eastern Orthodox tradition tends to see sin as disease, and salvation as therapeutic, while Western Christianity tends to see sin as transgression of the laws of God, and salvation as juridical. The various soteriological views only diverge further from there. Catholics generally see sanctification as necessary prior to justification, in order for God's justice to be upheld in his grace. Most Protestants on the other



John Wesley by William Hamilton, oil on canvas, 1788. © National Portrait Gallery, London

hand, tend to emphasize justification by faith in Christ as preceding any attempts of sanctification, with some even seeing any endeavor of sanctification after justification as works-righteousness. Still other Protestants disagree over whether people have any agency in their salvation at all, or if each person's eternal fate of salvation or damnation is already decided for them. In this muddle of diverging and often opposing answers to the question of how humanity can be saved, John Wesley's theology of salvation shines forth as a well-rounded view of humanity's salvation with a vibrant combination of inclusiveness, grace, collaboration, and wholeness.

Wesley first affirmed that God's universal prevenient grace had to come before any human effort or initiative in the work of salvation, in order to empower human participation. Wesley makes the following assertion in a sermon about God's grace: "The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is FREE IN ALL, and FREE FOR

ALL... Whatsoever good is in man, or is done by man, God is the author and doer of it.”¹

Wesley leaves no room for either ill-equipped human initiative or exclusivity on God’s part in the work of humanity’s salvation. Instead, Wesley sees God as taking the first step towards sinful humanity, freely extending prevenient grace to all of humanity. This grace is prevenient because it precedes any human responsibility in salvation. However Wesley’s prevenient grace does not simply effect pardon, in the way that Protestants understand grace. According to leading Wesley scholar, Randy L. Maddox, John Wesley’s prevenient grace “effects a partial restoring of our sin-corrupted human faculties, sufficient that we might sense our need and God’s offer of salvation, and respond to that offer.”² God extends prevenient grace to all of humanity in order that people can have the God-empowered agency to respond to God’s universal offer of salvation. While Wesley believes that this grace is extended to all people, he entertains no notions of universal salvation; for Wesley, God’s prevenient grace does not guarantee, but rather enables human response – in other words, it is resistible. John Wesley’s theology of salvation begins inclusively, with God’s provision of prevenient grace to all of humanity, to enable people to freely respond to – or ignore – his gracious offer of salvation.

Wesley believed that in addition to God’s prevenient grace in restoring humanity’s spiritual faculties, most people require God’s additional direct overtures of prevenient grace – which he referred to as awakenings – in order to respond to His offer

¹ John Wesley, "Free Grace," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 128 - Free Grace, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-128-free-grace/>.

² Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible grace: John Wesley's practical theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 87.

of salvation. John Wesley defined the experience of awakening as “the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him... the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God.”³ Wesley views God’s role in providing awakenings as beginning to open people’s eyes to the extent of their sinfulness. The purpose of these awakenings was not to simply bring people to a sense of guilt or shame, however. According to Maddox, Wesley believed that all people desperately need God to pardon and heal them from their sin, but “Wesley was convinced that most people are not sufficiently conscious of this need... as such, the initial step for them in any potential healing would be an awakening to their need.”⁴ Thus, by awakening people to the depth of their sinfulness, God is in fact mercifully providing them an opportunity to respond to His offer of salvation. Wesley believed that only upon being awakened by God could sinners begin to see their need for God’s pardon and healing. John Wesley believed that in addition to inclusively extending prevenient grace to all of humanity by restoring people’s ability to respond to His salvific offer, God also invites human response and agency by making direct attempts to rouse people out of their spiritual blindness – all in order to mercifully assist them in responding to His salvific offer.

Wesley held that before awakened people could respond to God’s offer of salvation, they first had to undergo an experience of repentance in response to their

³ John Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 85 - On Working Out Our Own Salvation, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-85-on-working-out-our-own-salvation>.

⁴ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 160.

awakening. Wesley states, that after a person's awakening, "Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone."⁵ Wesley saw repentance as the human response invited by God's prevenient awakening. According to Maddox, "repentance is our personal *acknowledgment* of our spiritual need, as we are awakened to it by the Spirit."⁶ Once someone comes to an apprehension of their sinfulness, and their utter helplessness to save themselves, they can truly respond in justifying faith to God's offer of salvation. According to Wesley, once God awakens persons, they can respond in repentance as they are empowered by the Spirit, and by doing so they are brought to a state of readiness to truly respond to God's salvific offer.

In Wesley's theology of salvation, once a sinner comes to a fuller realization of their sinfulness and helplessness, the person is ready to respond in full dependence on God's offer of salvation. Describing the case of a sinner who has been awakened and repented, Wesley declares: "This sinner, helpless and hopeless, casts himself wholly on the mercy of God in Christ, (which indeed he cannot do but by the grace of God)."⁷ Wesley affirms that, having been brought by God through awakening and repentance, a sinner can – by God's gracious empowerment – take hold of God's mercy. The sinner must take this step to accept God's offer of pardon, but this act of faith is entirely empowered by God's prevenient grace, and the mercy that they attain exists only by Christ's merits. According to Maddox, Wesley saw humanity as being wholly responsible

⁵ Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation."

⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 162.

⁷ John Wesley, "Justification By Faith," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 5 - Justification By Faith, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-5-justification-by-faith>.

to respond to God's gracious offer of pardon as He enables them, while being utterly unable to merit that pardon.⁸ Through God's prevenient, gracious empowerment and Christ's sufficient merit, God gives human agency a role in salvation that it would not otherwise deserve or be capable of. John Wesley incorporated a high degree of human agency in his theology of salvation to create a uniquely collaborative view of humanity's entrance into pardoning relationship with God that steers clear of works-righteousness by virtue of God's prevenient gracious empowering of humanity.

Wesley believed that once people enter into pardoning relationship with God, He bestows upon them the free gift of justification. John Wesley states that, after casting themselves onto God's mercy in Christ, sinners "experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, 'through grace,' we 'are saved by faith' ... By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour [*sic*] of God."⁹ Upon responding to God's offer of salvation, the sinner is pardoned and justified. Wesley avoids language like imputed righteousness in his conception of justification, for fear of antinomianism,¹⁰ and instead focuses sinners' justification in an alternate direction. Quoting Albert Outler, Maddox states: "Wesley's characteristic emphasis was that we are pardoned *in order to participate*."¹¹ Rather than considering justification or conversion to be the culmination of salvation, Wesley sees justification as only the beginning – a means to an end. Wesley held that sinners are justified once they respond to God's offer of pardon, and that this justification is in fact only the beginning of God's collaborative, holistic work of salvation in people's lives.

⁸ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 168.

⁹ Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation."

¹⁰ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 166.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

John Wesley saw justification as directly related to the new birth, the beginning of God's collaborative work to free humanity from the power of sin. Wesley states that the new birth "is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is 'created anew in Christ Jesus.'"¹² At the same time that justification effects relative change in the righteousness of a believer, the new birth is the beginning of a corresponding real change. This real change of the new birth is in fact only the beginning of something much greater. Wesley scholar T.A. Noble states: "For Wesley, *the sanctification of the Christian begins at regeneration*, that is, at the 'new birth,' which is simultaneous with justification."¹³ Noble makes the analogy that a newborn Christian breathes the Spirit of God in the same way that a newborn infant takes its first breath of air.¹⁴ For Wesley, the new birth is only the first breath of the Christian's lifetime of sanctification. John Wesley considered justification and the new birth as only the beginning of God's more holistic, collaborative work of salvation in the sanctification of Christians.

In addition to justification and the new birth, Wesley associated the witness of the Spirit with the beginning of God's collaborative, holistic work of salvation in a Christian's life. According to John Wesley, "The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given himself for me; and that all

¹² John Wesley, "The New Birth," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 45 - The New Birth, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-45-the-new-birth/>.

¹³ T.A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Historic Doctrine of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”¹⁵ Following the witness of the Spirit, Wesley asserts that the believer has a distinct awareness of being a child of God, inwardly and outwardly conformed to Christ.¹⁶ In Wesley’s theology of salvation, not long after – and sometimes immediately following – a believer’s justification, the Spirit of God witnesses along with the believer’s own Spirit that the believer is a child of God. Wesley deeply valued this assurance of one’s justification and adoption in the Christian life. Wesley states that following this witness of the Spirit, “There is a sweet calm; the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus, and the sinner being clearly satisfied that God is reconciled, that all his ‘iniquities are forgiven, and his sins covered,’”¹⁷ and the fruits of the Spirit are made manifest in the believer’s life.¹⁸ No doubt, Wesley places such value in the witness of the Spirit, and so earnestly encourages believers to ask God for it, because it provides a sure source of confidence in one’s state as a child of God, and a sense of peace in having right relationship with God. Wesley also places high value in the witness of the Spirit because of the fruit that flows from it – when the Spirit of God witnesses with the spirit of a believer, telling that believer that he or she is a child of God, they bear the fruit of the Spirit and grow in sanctification. Wesley saw the witness of the Spirit as a crucial benefit in the life of a believer, because of the encouragement and

¹⁵ John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit - Discourse One," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 10 - The Witness Of The Spirit: Discourse One, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-10-the-witness-of-the-spirit-discourse-one/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit - Discourse Two," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 11 - The Witness Of The Spirit: Discourse Two, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-11-the-witness-of-the-spirit-discourse-two/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

growth it collaboratively provides in the life of a believer, empowering them in the holistic healing of sanctification.

Wesley believed that once a believer is justified and born again, possessing the witness of the Spirit, they are empowered by God in the cooperative, complete healing of sanctification. Wesley states: “By sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God... It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man.”¹⁹ The effecting of real change toward righteousness begun in the new birth continues on unto perfection in sanctification. Not only is the believer freed – by collaborating with God in the growth of grace²⁰ – from the tyranny of outward sin, they are also progressively healed from inward sin as God breathes good desires into them.²¹ Noble states: “In keeping with the great tradition of Christian spirituality down through the centuries, Wesley speaks of a gradual work of sanctification that follows regeneration.”²² Wesley generally affirms the process of sanctification to be a steady, ongoing journey of growth with God. Sanctification is a labor of love, of ever growing up into Christ by the grace of God.²³ Wesley viewed the entirety of the Christian life – following justification, the new birth, and the witness of the Spirit – as the ongoing, collaborative work of sanctification, in which the believer ever grows in the love of God and man, is restored in the image of God, and is progressively freed from inward and outward sin by the empowering grace of God.

¹⁹ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation.”

²⁰ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 43 - The Scripture Way Of Salvation, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-43-the-scripture-way-of-salvation/>.

²¹ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation.”

²² Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*, 83.

²³ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation.”

While Wesley upheld that all who are born of God are freed from the compulsion of outward sin, he also recognized that sin remained in believers, and saw an enduring place for repentance in Christian life. Wesley states: “But though we readily acknowledge, ‘he that believeth is born of God,’ and ‘he that is born of God doth not commit sin;’ yet we cannot allow that he does not feel it from within: it does not reign, but it does remain... For, till we are sensible of our disease, it admits of no cure.”²⁴ Wesley recognized believers’ need to continually bring their inward sins before God if they are to be healed. He held that believers’ posture of helplessness without God in repentance can be answered by confidence in Christ, and that this exchange between humble repentance and confident faith will promote continued growth in sanctification.²⁵ According to Noble, Wesley held that “the consequence of this continuing fallen condition and the continuing involuntary transgressions is that we are always dependent on forgiveness through the atonement of Christ.”²⁶ Wesley consistently advocated that humble dependence on the empowering grace of Christ would lead to growth. Wesley saw a place for collaborative growth and holistic healing in the repentance of sins in believers, despite his views on believers’ relative lack of sin – at least outwardly – and saw an enduring benefit for even the most mature Christians to continually depend on the grace of Christ’s atonement.

²⁴ John Wesley, "The Repentance of Believers," The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 14 - The Repentance Of Believers, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-14-the-repentance-of-believers/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*, 91.



Statue of John Wesley outside of the Wesley Chapel in London

Finally, Wesley held that an ultimate form of sanctification from sin is available before death, by a supreme act of collaboration and holistic healing from sin by God: Christian Perfection. Wesley defines Christian Perfection as: “A full salvation from all our sins – from pride, self-will, anger, unbelief... it means perfect love. It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul. It is love ‘rejoicing evermore, praying without ceasing, in everything giving

thanks.’”²⁷ Wesley viewed Christian Perfection not as a perfection of degrees – although he nonetheless viewed it as total freedom from inward and outward sin – but rather perfection in the form of undivided love for God that always leaves room for continual growth.²⁸ Wesley taught that God was willing and able to work this Perfection in a believer *instantly*, and that believers should seek it out by faith.²⁹ Noble rightly points out: “If ‘entire’ sanctification is understood as purification from inbred sin, then it is only a means to an end: the end is that we should be filled with the love of God.”³⁰ For Wesley, the ultimate goal was not freedom from sin for the sake of moral perfection. Rather, the goal was complete and undivided love for God. Wesley believed and taught that, beyond the normal scope of sanctification, if believers sought the blessing of

²⁷ Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation.”

²⁸ John Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” The Wesley Center Online: Sermon 40 - Christian Perfection, 1999, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-40-christian-perfection/>.

²⁹ Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation.”

³⁰ Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People*, 86.

Christian Perfection out in faith, God was able and willing to bestow this blessing on them, an ultimate act of holistic healing and collaboration with God.

There are many different ways that Christians of different traditions, from different eras, have sought to answer the question: how can humanity be saved? John Wesley's theology of salvation is in many ways remarkably well rounded answer. From earliest work of prevenient grace in a sinner to the final work of Christian Perfection in a believer, Wesley sees salvation from sin as a joint effort of God and humankind, working in collaboration. In Wesley's theology of salvation, God graciously gives all people the ability and privilege to work out their holistic salvation from sin alongside their loving Father through the entirety of Christian life. Wesley weaves a therapeutic salvation from sin, the juridical sola fide, a high standard of holy living, and an emphasis on personal faith into a strangely vibrant and robust tapestry that animates every facet of his theology of salvation. Certainly John Wesley had his theological weak points like any theologian – although it does not make much sense to judge Wesley as one would a systematic theologian, the practical theologian that he was – but all in all, he presents a strong theology of salvation. Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians alike could benefit from considering a more Wesleyan theology of salvation.